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**Work, Parenting and Gender: The care-work negotiations of three couple relationships  
in the UK**

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## Abstract

Changes globally mean that there are now record numbers of mothers in paid employment and a reported prevalence of involved fathering. This poses challenges to mothers and fathers as they negotiate care-work practices within their relationships. Focusing on interviews with three heterosexual couples (taken from a wider UK qualitative project on working parents), the paper considers care-work negotiations of three couples, against a backdrop of debates about intensive mothering and involved fathering. It aims to consider different configurations of work and care within three different couple relationships. We found that power within the relationships was negotiated along differential axis of gender and working status (full or part time paid work). We present qualitatively rich insights into these negotiations. Framed by a critical discursive psychological approach, we call on other researchers to think critically about dominant discourses and practices of working, caring and parenting, pointedly how couples situated around the world operationalise these discourses in talking about themselves as worker and carers.

Keywords: Gender, parenting, work, qualitative, discursive psychology

### Introduction

This paper considers the relationship between work, gender and parenting by focusing on care-work negotiations of three couples, against a backdrop of debates about intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) and involved fathering (Wall & Arnold, 2007). It aims to consider different configurations of work and care within three different couple relationships in the UK. Framed by critical discursive psychology, the authors present qualitatively rich insights into dominant discourses and practices of working, caring and parenting mobilised in the interviews. The paper asks, how do these couples operationalise these discourses in their talk about themselves as workers and carers and what can we learn about the negotiation of power in relationships along gender and working hours (working status within the family unit).

Critically reading ideologies of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996) and involved fathering (Wall & Arnold, 2007), we examine how three couples negotiate their caring responsibilities and paid work. Debates about intensive mothering and involved fathering recognise that whilst women have historically been marginalised as ‘other’, particularly in the workplace, men have been marginalised as ‘other’ in the home environment. Thus an overarching aim of this piece is to note the importance of considering these ideologies around gender, work and parenting.

### Work, parenting and gender in early twenty-first century UK

In the UK, there are record numbers of mothers in paid employment (Office of National Statistics [ONS], 2013). Alongside this, fathers, in the broadest sense, are reportedly taking on more caring responsibilities (Ba, 2014, Kaufman, 2013). As such, there

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are opportunities to examine how mothers and fathers reconcile work and family in early twenty-first century

There were 7.7 million families with dependent children in the UK in 2013 (ONS, 2013). Within the UK, there is a dual expectation embedded in work-family policy that parents are both economically active in the labour market and engaged in caring for children (Fagan, 2014). This is noted through the political rhetoric of 'hard working families' where 'work' is viewed in financial, not caregiving terms, with Swan (2014) noting the rise in the number of parents struggling with the dual demands of paid work and care of their children.

The Labour Force Survey (ONS, 2013) notes an almost even split in gender across the UK workforce. Whilst the majority of men work full-time, women are more likely to become part-time workers once they have become mothers. Consequently, this trend of part-time working hours has a knock-on effect that women will also tend to earn less income through paid-work. Working practices within the UK have been termed 1.5 worker families (Prince Cooke, 2011; Sayer and Gornick, 2012) which refer to a family with one part-time worker and one full-time worker, with typically the mother taking on the part-time role. Despite gender mainstreaming commitments within EU policy directives, UK policy compares poorly by reinforcing traditional gendered caring and working constructs of mother as primary carer and father as breadwinner worker (Sigle-Rushton and Kenney, 2004). The UK did not implement a scheme for paternal leave until April 2003, when fathers were given the right to two weeks paid paternity leave. Whilst policy changes are afoot to increase sharing parenting provisions, the UK is considerably behind other EU countries with respect to father-friendly policies, such as Sweden who introduced paternity leave decades earlier.

Miller (2012) notes women's participation in the labour market has witnessed a growth over decades to record levels. In comparison to men, women's pay, career

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opportunities and standard of living drop after childbearing. Budig and England (2001) suggest a proportion of the wage gap between men and women can be described as a ‘motherhood penalty’ in which, working mothers unfairly carry the burden of caring, often opting for part-time and flexible working hours to accommodate the dual demands of paid work and caregiving. As such, for mothers, working part-time equates with less earning, lower personal financial status and earning power. Williams (2010) describes this phenomenon as a ‘maternal wall’ of discrimination as employers construct working mothers as having less capacity to work and more likely to take time off work due to caregiving responsibilities. Significantly, a burgeoning body of evidence on men as fathers is beginning to inform this work-care landscape including fathers’ attempts to reconfigure traditional ways of working and caring (Dempsey and Hewitt, 2012; Doucet, 2006; Kaufman, 2013; Miller, 2010). Williams (2010) suggests that men with caregiving responsibilities have experienced discrimination from employers who refuse them the right to leave work when a child is sick.

Dempsey and Hewitt (2012) note a rise in the awareness that men have childcare and home-related responsibilities, beyond breadwinning. However drawing on international comparisons of London, New York and ‘patriarchal’ Singapore, Tan (2014:1) notes that gendered caring, working and parenting persist in many nations around the world with intensive mothering prevalent and expected as a social norm in Singapore. Furthermore, Emiko Ochiai’s 2009 research on care and welfare regimes in East and South-East Asia suggests that societies have traditional gendered binaries of care and work spanning centuries making them deeply entrenched.

Biggart and O’Brien (2010) state that the majority of modern UK fathers hold less traditional views than mothers on the gendered binaries of carer and worker. However, whilst expressing egalitarian views, in practice, Biggart and O’Brien (ibid) found that most

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fathers still work full-time whilst mothers provide the bulk of childcare within the family, most probably due to societal expectations of caregiving practice in combination with Governmental policies regarding maternal, paternity and parental leaves. The British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey (2012) (undertaken annually) highlighted that the majority of workers felt that women should be prepared to give family responsibilities greater priority than paid work. Similarly, men were expected to be the financial providers or ‘breadwinners’.

Indeed, in contemporary society, we are seen to be parenting in an ‘intensive mothering’ ideology (Hays, 1996) in which the self-sacrificing nature of the mother becomes foregrounded. That is, the mother must manage to juggle her work-life and her mothering abilities, whilst placing the onus on her responsibilities as a mother (Sevón, 2012). According to Hays (1996: 8) although there has been a historical and cultural shift to the ideology of intensive mothering, mothering was not always regarded as “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive”. Indeed this notion of intensive mothering, whilst pervasive, marginalises significant numbers of mothers through constructed notions of care-giving versus wage-earning choice. This is problematic given the earlier point made that wage-earning is deemed an expectation on mothers in the UK and elsewhere around the world.

Interestingly, alongside these pervasive intensive mothering ideologies is the growing presence of an ideology of ‘involved fatherhood’. In other words, contemporary fathering culture suggests that fathers should be actively involved in the care of their children (Dempsey and Hewitt, 2012; Cosson and Graham, 2012). That said, there are obvious contradictions between suggested fathers’ involvement and actual parenting practices (Craig, 2006). This has lead some to suggest that we should be focusing on the strength of the father-child relationship rather than the time spent, i.e. ‘intimate fathering’ instead of

involved fathering (Dermott, 2008). Thus whilst many scholars have acknowledged changes to gender, work and parenting, there are on-going debates as to the extent and shape of these changes (Featherstone, 2009) particularly in discussions around gender and caregiving.

## **Method**

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study employed a critical discursive psychological methodology (Wetherell and Edley, 1999). Critical Discursive Psychology frames gender as socially situated in discourse, language and action (Burr, 2003). We mobilise the concept of discourse as a way of interpreting the world and giving it meaning through language which has a constructive force of social action. We take the position that discourses are both constructed and constructive. That is that participants are both positioned and able to position themselves in their discourse.

Although there are debates about the ways to analyse qualitative interview data within a broad framework of critical discursive psychology, many researchers (including in this paper) begin by drawing upon steps from Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) outlined by Willig (2008). As the methodology aims to focus on the constitutive nature of discourse, this involves the identification of the discursive terrain available to discuss a particular issue. In this case, the authors identified the dominant discourses and frames of reference mobilised in language about care-paid work negotiations. The purpose of this was to consider how these dominant ways of talking, doing and thinking care-work negotiations shapes possibilities and potentialities for caring and working practices and subjectivities. The authors then turned to a micro discursive psychological approach (Edwards & Potter, 1992) to consider the interactional components of discussing work, care and parenting. In other words, they considered the interview data and its interactional components. Please see Budds, Locke & Burr (2014) for further discussion on this.



The methodological framework of this paper gives substantive attention to the taken-for-granted assumptions of caring and working practices undertaken by mothers and fathers. We analyse in-depth qualitative interview data with three heteronormative couples to identify their mobilisation of discourses of caring and working including how they position themselves in the discourses. By focusing on these discourses identified in the data, we question assumptions that gender exists in individuals, considering instead how versions of caring and working are available to mothers and fathers through socially situated normative practices. Critically reading the data, we explore how the interviewees mobilise caring and working discourses to negotiate power within the couple relationship. We examine how the participants construct caring and working practices as mundane and ordinary within socially situated gender norms and social policy 'realities'. We draw the paper together by discussing the implications of these power negotiations for their work-care practices as working mothers and fathers in early twenty-first century UK.

We consider knowledge to be situated, complex and provisional (Wetherell and Edley, 1999, Willig, 2008). To gain a greater understanding of systems of power and the partiality of knowledge, this critical psychology discursive methodology illuminates the 'deeply problematic' nature of gender (Lazar, 2007:141) by noting that, gender as a construct opposes men and women as discrete homogenous categories. We frame gender as intersecting with, amongst others, working status, sexuality, dis/ability and race informing 'simultaneously subjective, structural and about social positioning and everyday practices' (Brah and Phoenix, 2004:1).

Here we concentrate on how the men and women in the study negotiate work-care arrangements, considering gender and earning status based on part-time and full-time working. We recognise workers in different occupations earn different amounts, referred to elsewhere as earning status (see Lawthom, 1999, for a critical discussion of professional and

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non-professional differences). However, for the purpose of this study, our focus lies in the full- and part-time working hours rather than types of occupation because we see working hours as a parenting ‘strategy’ to manage the dual demands of paid work and care. Beatrice Campbell (2014) notes that UK work-family policy discourse mobilises notions of parental choice under a broad neoliberal welfare system where choice is limited within intersections of class and gender.

We analyse in-depth qualitative interviews data, to consider the intricate and nuanced ways in which the three couples negotiate power through discourses of intersecting systems of gender and earning status (part-time and full-time working). Pointedly, our analysis focuses on three distinct couples where one parent is a full-time worker and the other is either in paid work full-time or part-time, with gender differing in these cases. By critically analysing the discourses of caring and working we highlight the intersections of difference in these familial examples of caring, parenting and paid work.

## **Participants**

The data for this paper draws on semi-structured interviews with three heteronormative couples with children under school age (this is children in their fifth year of age in the UK) collected by the first author. All participants were cohabitating together in the UK at the time of data collection (2009-2011). Their occupations varied in type (professional and non-professional) and contractual arrangements of part-time and full-time work in the public service sector. The decision for children under school age was made because most contemporary changes to UK work-family policy centred on families with children under five years of age, namely extensions to parental leave entitlements (maternity / paternity leave, parental and carers) and flexible working rights (Work and Families Act 2006). Furthermore

it was felt that the years from birth to five required the most significant levels of intensive ‘hands-on’ caring (Craig and Sawrikar, 2009) thus providing the most data rich site for this research.

The study was cleared by the first author’s Institutional Ethical Review panel prior to the study taking place. Recruitment was done through advertising in public places in two towns within a 15 mile radius of a Northern City in UK. The advertisements asked potential volunteers to contact the first author for participation, ethical considerations and research procedures. Those parents who volunteered in the first instance (self-defined as middle class) and were used as gatekeepers, through a snowballing sampling technique, providing contact to other potential participants including their own partners. The research aimed to gain a rich corpus of detailed accounts of their everyday parenting experiences and does not claim that those recruited are representative, recognising all respondents were, in the broadest sense, middle class, due, in part to the snowballing sampling technique adopted (Ba, 2014).

Whilst participants were sampled as couples, it was a deliberate decision to interview each parent separately. **In joint interviews the couple can jointly negotiate and construct their narrative, enabling couples to blend their constructions as a couple (Taylor and de Vocht, 2011). Through one to one interviews the parents did not influence each other’s talk during the interviews and we could focus on each individual.** All interviews lasted around one hour and were transcribed verbatim from a digital audio-recording of the interview with minimal transcription notation (pauses) noted on the transcript. The aim of the interviews was to examine how participants spoke about combining paid-work with childcare. Questions included; *ow do you negotiate your weekly schedule as a working parent? How many hours a week is your paid work? Can you describe a typical working day including the caring tasks you perform as part of this day?* As per the method of

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interviewing, whilst there were topics that were to be explored, there was flexibility for the participants to raise and focus on the issues that were significant to them.

## **Analysis**

For the purpose of the manuscript, we are focusing on three distinct cases from a larger corpus to demonstrate how gender roles are played out in negotiating caregiving and working roles. These cases contain examples of where one parent is a full-time worker and the other is either full-time or part-time, what differs is the gender of the worker. We are interested in how in these familial examples, issues around caring, parenting and paid-work are managed. The three cases will be examined in turn.

### **Case Study One: Stan and Debbie.**

**This case considers the ways in which Stan (a full-time worker) and Debbie (part-time worker) negotiate which of them cares for their children when they wake up in the night:**

Stan is a 36 year old, white British man who is a full-time public sector shift worker. His wife, Debbie, is a 34 year old, white British woman who works as a part-time professional in public services. They have two children, a three year old son, Alex and an eighteen month old daughter, Paige. As with all of the cases, all names given are pseudonyms.

Stan and Debbie both describe the difficulty of care-work arrangements within their shared parenting because they felt exhausted (Fox, 2009; Miller, 2012). Here we consider examples of times when they both discussed how caring interrupts their abilities to sleep and rest before returning to work the next day. As the analysis will demonstrate, there appears to be power being negotiated along different but intersecting lines of gender and caregiving, and between part-time and full-time work.

Excerpt 1: Stan (Case Study One)

Interviewer: So how's it going? How's life treating you being a dad?

Stan: Alright. Yeah. Just knackered. And the oldest[child] is in to everything and now, the little one, is a right moaner.

Interviewer: No sleep eh?

Stan: The other night one was screaming for a bottle, the other is getting in bed with us and I'm on late shift at work. So I got out of bed, left her [Debbie] to it and got in the oldest's [child's] bed. We are like a pair of zombies. And look at me, I'm so unfit. I keep telling her, I need to get out running again. Working full-time means I don't have chance.

Interviewer: Is it always Debbie who sees to the children in the night?

Stan: Yep, she's a part-timer, she can catch up on sleep.

In the excerpt Stan positions Debbie (his wife) as the primary carer responsible for caregiving during the night. His talk reveals the relational aspects of caregiving by differentiating between his and his wife's responsibilities in this example (Cosson & Graham, 2012; Miller, 2010). However, what is interesting is that his talk reveals how his own need

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for sleep is elevated above that of caring for his children or his wife's need for sleep. Here we see an intersection of the discourses of caring and working as he says, '*I'm on late shift at work*' to construct himself as a working parent. Notably, his talk gives no detail of his wife Debbie's working hours and whether she has had to get up early to go to work.

In this excerpt Stan suggests he is '*just knackered*' in which an emotive '*knackered*' is coupled with the word '*just*' to provide a description of the ordinariness (Sacks, 1992; Edwards, 2007) and the taken-for-granted nature of being a parent of two young children where exhaustion and sleep deprivation is constructed with an inevitability. Stan constructs a detailed account of a typical night caring for his two children plays out. He says '*So I got out of bed, left her (Debbie) to it and got in the oldest's [child's] bed*'. This action orientation positions '*her*', his reference to his wife (Debbie) as the primary carer. In this example it is evident that, whilst he positions himself as sleep deprived '*just knackered*', he takes action to sleep whilst relinquishing the caring responsibility to his wife who is left awake, sharing the marital bed with their children whilst he sleeps alone in his child's bed. In this sense he positions his wife (Debbie) as primary carer also depicting the taken-for-granted nature of his own exhaustion. In this way then, Stan constructs his role as father very much in hegemonic masculine terms of the economic provider of male breadwinning status (Connell, 1990; Gatrell, 2005). Stan articulates his need to keep physically fit, positioning Debbie within an intensive mothering discourse, giving a gendered sense of his own leisure time. This resonates with Sevón's (2012) findings on Finnish first-time mothers, '*My life has changed, but his hasn't: Making sense of the gendering of parenthood during the transition to motherhood*'. However, gendered caring roles are not always explicit in Stan's account. Instead his account is seemingly justified in terms of working (and implicitly earning) status as to whether the parent is full-time or part-time.

He says it is Debbie's 'part-time' working status that determines who takes on caregiving duties throughout the night, rather than making Debbie's status as 'mother' the key reason for this. Note also, and against an ideology of intensive mothering and self-sacrifice, Stan very clearly identifies his own needs of keeping fit. Therefore, he is stating that he is unable to fulfil his personal needs due to his parenting role and full-time working status.

If we compare Stan's account with Debbie's below, we can see how Debbie invokes her parenting 'mothering' role as a reason as to why she takes on the majority of caregiving.

Excerpt 2: Debbie (Case Study One)

Debbie: Me and Stan are both tired, we both work but I'm part-time and he's full-time. If the baby is crying in the night, he'll say 'you sort it, I'm tired, I've been working all day'. I definitely do think it's good to be a working mum but I work part-time. Yeah I contribute to the family but part-time work means, the kids have still got me, I bring in money but I do most of the caring...I'm the good mother, the slave, the bottom rung on the ladder in the family, looking after everyone else before me.

Whilst both refer to her part-time status, Debbie talks about this using the gendered construct of mother in which part-time work facilitates her managing work-care demands explicitly as a mother within an intensive mothering ideology (Hays, 1996; Sevón, 2012). Furthermore we also see that Debbie positions Stan as the decision maker in the example of caring at night, namely, she claims that he tells her that night caring is her responsibility as he's been working all day. In this way Debbie constructs her role as the gendered mother whilst Stan notes their different working

status rather than their differences as mother and father. There is some anger implicit in Debbie's account where she notes herself as mother in sacrificial martyred terms, that she's at the '*bottom rung of the ladder*', using imagery to depict herself as the least prioritised member of the family. Sevon (2012) has referred to this as intensive mothering narratives of guilt and selflessness.

As such then, Debbie is expressing dissatisfaction with the level of care she provides for her family, namely the societal expectations of the self-sacrificing nature of (intensive) motherhood (Hays, 1996), and it becomes a source of tension for Debbie with her partner, yet it is also a role that she has in some ways adopted. Clearly, there is power negotiated between part-time and full-time work with Stan making it explicit that his full-time worker status presents him with more power than Debbie when they are negotiating their caregiving responsibilities. Our critical reading of the excerpts suggests that both Stan and Debbie constructed a sense of inevitability that part-time work means an assumption that they have the capacity to undertake more caring. Thus, although there is, at least implicitly, evidence of gender influencing the care-work negotiations between Debbie and Stan, the intersections of working and financial status are also prevalent. Dempsey & Hewitt (2012) suggest that these complex intersections have implications on fathering in early twenty-first century and, more broadly, parenting relationships in their rich diversity.

Another way of examining this complex relationship between gender and working status is to consider the second example which is from Michala and Jake. This is similar in terms of working status to Stan and Debbie, but what differs here is that it is the mother who is full-time paid worker and the father who works part-time. In this case, we will consider how Michala and Jake negotiate planning around childcare when Michala is delayed at work.



**Case Study Two: Michala and Jake.**

**This case considers the ways in which Michala (a full-time worker) and Jake (a part-time worker) negotiate who makes contingency plans when Michala is delayed at work**

Michala, is a 30 year old white British, full-time care professional. Jake, is a 33 year old white British man working part-time in public services. They have a two year old daughter, Libby, who attends playgroup in the mornings. In the afternoons, both Jake and her grandparents care for Libby until Michala came home from work.

In the following excerpt, Michala is discussing contingency plans around childcare if she gets delayed from work on the days that her partner, Jake, is also working.

## Excerpt 3: Michala (Case Study Two)

Michala: There have been times when I have been home late, about 30 minutes and I've had to ring my mum. There was one occasion when I had to go to Old Town because of a child protection case and I was out until 11.30 at night and had to ring Jake up at work and ask could he get to finish work to go and pick Libby up and bring her home but he couldn't so then I had to ring my mum and ask did she mind it if she could bring her home and put her to bed and stay with her until Jake gets home at 9 which she said was fine. So I felt really bad about that. So I got home at 11.30 and was going take the time back to see Libby in the morning but I had to be in Old Town again for 9 so I had to leave here at 7.15am so I think I went 2 days without seeing her and it weren't nice really.

Michala's full-time work means that she occasionally leaves work later than expected. This appears to be a source of tension between her and her partner, Jake. However, they both

discuss (in their separate interviews) how they managed the situation by drawing on the support of extended family.

In the excerpt Michala describes how working a longer day than expected meant she did not see her daughter, Libby, before she went to bed or when she got up in the morning. Michala expresses her unhappiness about this by building a detailed account of strategies she used to manage care-work demands. Michala discursively discounts claims that she chose to work rather than care for her child, constructing the dilemma of being delayed at work thus unable to see her daughter before she went to bed. She draws on wider discourses of caring which position a mother's responsibility as putting her child's needs first. Therefore there is a conflict to be managed, that of societal expectations of the self-sacrificing nature of (intensive) motherhood (Hays, 1996), working against her commitments outside of the family. This intersects in the excerpt with discourses of working which draw on social norms of reliability, presenteeism and conscientiousness (Edwards and Wacjman, 2005). Thus Michala justifies and rationalises her decision to stay at work and find alternative childcare. For Michaela, talking about being a working mother produced an account in which she tried to maintain and preserve her interests as a good mother without making an explicit statement about this in the account (Christopher, 2012). Her disclaimer that she is working on a child protection case gives a sense of the specific challenges she faced being a working mother with responsibility to protect children in her professional working capacity.

Intensive mothering ideology suggests an incompatibility with a career women construct, namely a professional full-time working mother, such as Michala. is perceived as selfish and lacking self-sacrifice (Pillay, 2009; Raddon, 2002). Whilst full-time work is constructed with associated kudos within the masculinised notion of breadwinner, historically it is deemed selfish when associated with the working mother (Christopher, 2012; Gatrell,

2005). Careers are constructed as incompatible with intensive mothering (Cahusac and Kanji, 2013; Edwards and Wajcman, 2005).

As stated earlier, a family which has one full-time worker and one part-time worker has been characterised in work-family literature as a 1.5 worker family (Sayer and Gornick, 2012). To reiterate, Michala is a full-time care professional. Jake, her partner, is a part-time service sector worker. Medved and Rawlins (2011) characterise Jake and Michala's work-care familial arrangements as non-traditional. This non-traditional construct is defined as reversing the orthodox part-time female worker and full-time male breadwinner family form prevalent in the UK. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (2013) disputes suggestions that significant and rising numbers of fathers are participating in part-time and reduced hour employment noting that, women still unfairly carry the burden of caring regardless of the reversal of part-time and full-time working arrangements between many couples. O'Brien (2005) states that, caring and working practices differ between individual men and women, therefore, making any broad brush generalisation of the caring and working arrangements of a 1.5 worker family is over-simplistic. Gatrell (2005) in her in-depth qualitative parenting study of couples (twenty women and eighteen men) from the UK in professional or managerial posts found that, work-care decisions made by the couples were complex negotiations based on the intersections of gender, occupation and earning status. With this in mind, we now extend the analysis by turning to examine Jake's account about the same incident in which Michala was delayed at work. In the following excerpt, Jake talks about being unable to leave his work early when Michala rings him because she is delayed at her work.

Excerpt 4: Jake (Case Study Two)

Jake: She's the breadwinner in the family, Yeah, work's really important to me, you know, I have to go to work like Michala. There was this time when she was delayed at work and she has rang me to leave work but I still had to work. I can't leave, you know.

Unlike Michala, Jake does not detail his attempts to negotiate with his employer so that he could leave work early. Jake says he '*can't leave*' inferring that workplace restrictions stop him doing so. Note however that he does not give details of the reasons why he cannot leave work. Neither does he provide evidence of what might happen if he did leave work early. He emphasizes that '*Yeah work's really important to me*' thus accounting for his part-time status, in terms of hegemonic masculine ideals of employed fathers, that he is performing this role out of necessity, not out of laziness or a lack of willingness to work. Positioning himself in a working discourse he describes himself as a worker '*like Michala*' minimising any suggestion that work is less important to him than her. In doing so, he expresses his commitment to work whilst also constructing work as restricting his availability to care for his daughter. The action orientation of this is that he elevates work above care by talking implicitly about the power of employment to restrict his caring availability. Jake differentiates himself from Michala by describing her, not him, as '*the breadwinner in the family*'. However, he also draws on discourses of working to construct himself as a worker whilst differentiating this with Michala using the word '*breadwinner*' for her but not himself. He talks of them sharing worker status, positioning himself within discourses of working by describing '*having*' to go to work. It is also noteworthy that on his working days, Jake would not consider childcare in the same way as he does for the rest of the week.

As with the first case from Stan and Debbie, we can see in the excerpts above that the discussion of roles and working/caring practices are not being made purely on the basis of

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gender and perceived societal gender norms of parenting. Instead, gender appears to be intersecting with paid work. In the first example, we saw how the part-time worker, in this case the mother, was seen as responsible for child-caring throughout the night. It wasn't altogether clear from Stan and Debbie's accounts whether this was a gendered or paid-work issue. This is where the second case from Michala and Jake was particularly interesting. Michala and Jake were also a 1.5 family but this time the working roles were reversed, that is Michala was the full time worker and Jake worked part-time. And yet, in this case the part-time worker didn't necessarily pick up the slack for childcare, rather emergency childcare was provided by the grandmother. Thus it appears that the mother, irrespective of working patterns, is typically seen as the one who has the responsibility to parent more. Whilst in the first case, these societal norms of parenting and mothering were invoked by the mother herself (and on the basis of reported speech from the father). In the second example, gendered roles were only invoked by implication, and again, it was by Michala discussing her guilt (as a working mum) at not seeing her child for a couple of days.

Given the lack of clarity on what is due to gender norms and expectations and what is working (and financial) status (and therefore power) in the relationships, it is interesting to consider a third case. This case is from two parents who both work full-time and it considers how they negotiate who leaves work when their child is sick.

### **Case Study Three: Sarah and Neil.**

**This case considers the ways in which Sarah and Neil, both full-time workers, negotiate who leaves work when their child is sick.**

Sarah is a 40 year old white, British full-time working professional woman. Neil is a 43 year old dual heritage, British full-time working professional. Their daughter, Jade, is three years old.

Here we consider interview data when they discuss examples of the different responses from their managers when they needed to take time off to care for their sick daughter. As the analysis will demonstrate, there appears to be power being negotiated explicitly along gender lines.

Excerpt 5: Sarah (Case Study Three)

Sarah: You see, I think there are different expectations. With us both being in management as well, you used to occasionally get, men who would ring up and say, 'Oh I've got to stay home today my kid is sick' and my male manager would say 'well where's his mum?' That's why I stay home when Jade is sick.

Interviewer: So you and Neil both work full-time in similar roles?

Sarah: Yes, we do the same job, we met when we used to work together. I mean different expectations of us as parent. I mean different expectations on mothers and fathers.

Sarah's talk explicitly signposts gender when referring to '*different expectations*' of mothers and fathers to manage care-work arrangements when a child is sick. Interestingly, Sarah's account also refers to her and Neil as, 'us as parents', thus, whilst explaining that they both work as managers, she uses a collective reference to them as parents (note the gender neutral connotations of this term). In this sense, Sarah's account reveals that, whilst they are both parents, their gender influences workplace expectations of work-care arrangements. Not only does Sarah make explicit the differences in gender roles between her

and Neil, she also makes clear that it was male manager who suggests it is a mother's role rather than a father's to take time off work to care for a sick child.

In the following excerpt, we can read Neil's account of his experiences with his manager when he asks for time off work to take care of his sick daughter.

Excerpt 6: Neil (Case Study Three)

Neil: My female manager said to me last week, 'you need to choose between your job and Sarah's career. If your kid is sick, let Sarah take time off work not you'. So I do.

Interviewer: And how does that work for you?

Neil: Makes it easier at work but not ideal at home, for us as a couple, or me as a dad, because I do want to do more of that.

Both Neil and Sarah recognise gender within their experiences as working mother and working father. Their talk describes separate experiences about the expectations on mothers rather than fathers to care for sick children. Gerson (2004) argues that, despite increased numbers of women in employment, at all levels of employment, gender differences are institutionalised. For Emslie and Hunt (2009: 15) 'Many contemporary studies of 'work-life balance' either ignore gender or take it for granted'. However, clearly Sarah and Neil's excerpts reveal their own thoughts about the place of gender in their work-care dilemmas and conflicts. In analysing both Sarah and Neil's talk, it appears that there is an embedded resignation of the differential expectations on them along gender lines. However, they are also quick to note that, whilst they have these expectations put upon them, they do not endorse the underlying assumptions that accompany them. Notably, Neil suggests the arrangement is not ideal because it is impacting on the time he can spend with his daughter yet makes no reference to the unfairness on Sarah in terms of her career.

Following Gerson's (2004) recognition of the significance of gender in work and family arrangements, we argue that it is important to contextualise Sarah and Neil's experiences within the wider social context. Sarah and Neil's talk lacks discussion about how they challenged these different gendered expectations. Williams (2010) describes workers lack of challenge to workplace gendering in these circumstances as commonplace because workers are worried they may be fired. Both Gerson (2004) and Williams (2010) advocate developing understanding of the larger social contexts of personal choices and strategies rather than passing judgment on individuals. Rather than oversimplifying this analysis by suggesting their talk simply reveals their personal choices, we concur with Gerson (2004) and Williams (2010) that Sarah and Neil's choices are rooted in enduring gendered institutions of paid work and unpaid caring, they appear to be both resigned to and resisting. In Neil's excerpt there is a reference to Sarah's career and he talks of this as opposed to Neil's job. As discussed earlier in this paper, career woman is a particular constructed version of the worker identity (Thomson, Kehily, Hadfield and Sharpe, 2011). We also note that this career women construct is not simplistically associated with all working women but middle class professional women (Lawthom, 1999; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003). **Although in recent decades the number of working mothers has increased**, the career women construct continues to be associated with selfishness which conflicts with notions of the selflessness embedded in essentialist notions of women and intensive mothering ideology (Hays, 1996). Indeed in the case of Sarah and Neil, gender is critical. We note how Neil justifies the sexist perspective of women as primary caregiver as determined by his 'female' manager. Alongside this, our analysis notes how the career for the caring parent has to be chosen against – therefore the old adage of child or career, and this is done on gendered lines. Interestingly, however the excerpts also illuminate their resistance of societal norms of parenting with Neil's account hinting that about conflict at home – as a



couple – but also flags up that parenting is a partnership for them but one that society won't allow through its prescriptive gender roles for parents. Neil also notes that he wants to be a more involved father (Wall & Arnold, 2007), i.e. where fathers express wanting to be more involved in the day to day care of their children. As we noted earlier though, whilst fathers express these sentiments, the actual involvements of dads do not reflect these sentiments, possibly due, in the main, to a mix of gendered working practices, gender norm expectations, social policy around parental leave and the pay inequalities between genders. We will pick up some of these issues in the discussion.

## **Discussion**

This paper set out to consider care-work negotiations of three heterosexual couples, against a backdrop of debates about intensive mothering and involved fathering. Previous readings of the area have noted how gender norms become (re)produced in the family environment following a couple having children (Fox, 2009). However, we were interested, given the factors of more women entering the paid workforce, and the policy changes set to increase parental leaves, as to how couples are negotiating these issues in the UK in early twenty-first century. We used three case studies as an exemplar. The first two of these consisted of what has been called 1.5 families, that is where one parent works full-time in paid employment and the other works part time. What varied though was the gender of the full-time worker. In the third case, we considered a couple who both worked full time, in the light of how they managed caring for an ill child. What we noted from the analysis of all of these cases was that it was too simplistic a reading of the data to presume that gender was the only factor influencing who stayed at home to care for their children (Ba, 2014). Whilst we are not suggesting that gender wasn't the overriding factor, we noticed through our nuanced

analysis, how gender and gender norms around parenting and responsibility were intersecting with other factors such as paid working status, i.e. full or part time. Certainly in the first two cases, it wasn't altogether clear where the gender began and the work status ended and we saw negotiations on the basis of gender and part-time working. However, when we reached the third case where both parents were working full time, it became clear that gender was the overriding factor of who held the main responsibility for caregiving (Sevón, 2012). What was also of interest is how the prevailing ideology of intensive mothering was a concern for the participants (Hays, 1996). The mothers in the first two cases invoked their mothering status in terms of their caregiving responsibilities, even in the case of the full-time working mother (Michala) who expressed guilt in terms of juggling full-time paid work and motherhood. In the third case, where both parents worked full time, issues around the gendered nature of caring for children were still there, but, this time, both the mother and father made it clear that this was not down to them and their choices as parents and paid workers, rather this was a constraint placed on both of them by their managers (Cahusac and Kanji, 2013). The third case is particularly illuminating for the issues around gender, caring and paid work and in this instance both parents claim that they want to become involved parents, however they cite the societal perspectives as being forced upon them.

What this paper has demonstrated through an in-depth qualitative, reading of the interviews, is how different categories of gender and paid work (and by implication, power) are intersecting in the decisions that working parents are making. The issue of the status of paid work and power in terms of decision making for who cares (Ba, 2014; Doucet, 2006) are at play in all of the extracts. As we saw, the working status was given as a reason by Stan for not taking on the night shift of care, but also resisted by Jake in the second case study, that on his working days he is not able to drop everything to care for this daughter as he does that on other days. Thus it seems that whilst Jake doesn't appear to resent his part-time working

status and caring for his child, he seems intent on protecting his working status on certain days. In this respect, and has been noted elsewhere (Connell, 1990), there are inherent tensions between involved fathering and hegemonic masculinity. That is, men are challenged to be ‘involved fathers’ (Wall & Arnold, 2007) by expectations to be both paid worker and carer (Cosson and Graham, 2012). Yet these tensions don’t appear to be the same as the challenges for mothers. Instead, within an ideology of ‘intensive’ (Hays, 1996) or ‘extensive’ (Christopher, 2012) motherhood, mothers are expected to demonstrate their ‘good mothering’ despite the constraints of paid work. As such, the mothers in the extracts here are demonstrating an almost self-sacrificing inevitability of the decisions made around managing caring and paid work commitments.

To conclude, through our detailed analysis, we have revealed tensions of negotiation of caring and working and the complex picture in early twenty-first century for working parents. Whilst the couples in this paper have three different work-care arrangements, all of them show awareness of traditional gendered constructs linked to parenting and invoked these to varying degrees to account for their child caring decisions (Fox, 2009). However, they illuminate how, for them, caring versus working is not an option (Hays, 1996). Instead the couples in these excerpts, talked about the dual expectation on parents, regardless of whether they are a mother or father, to combine working and caring. Whilst this paper has examined three couples in the UK in detail, we have considered intensive mothering and involved fatherhood as ideologies spanning temporal and spatial boundaries. For instance, we have used these to touch on a number of international perspectives on work, gender and parenting, (Cosson and Graham, 2012; Ochiai, 2009, Sevón, 2012; Tan, 2014) in attempt to stimulate discussions about work-care negotiations, specifically concentrating on the how couples talk about themselves as worker and carers within couple relationships.



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